

SYNOPSIS

“FIRE!”

Advertising and Illustrated Mail Document Fire-related Subjects, 1817-Early 1930s

PURPOSE AND SCOPE: The purpose of the exhibit is to use advertising and illustrated mail to show a broad range of subjects related to fire-fighting, fire mitigation, fire prevention and related topics. These include, but are not limited to, alarms, fire escapes, fire engines and equipment, fire-equipment supply companies, and fire prevention devices and even fire resistant or fire-proof construction materials. Some treatment is given to the social and business aspects of fire companies. Because insurance covers feature a variety of fire-related themes, they are, save for two pages, spread throughout the exhibit. Maritime-related subjects (i.e., fire boats) are not included.

With regard to **scope**, the exhibit shows the evolution of fire-fighting, equipment and prevention/mitigation from an early Philadelphia hydrant (1817) to the early 1930s, by which time most fire-apparatus and equipment could be recognized as “modern”.

TREATMENT AND ORGANIZATION: The covers in this exhibit are arranged chronologically within subjects which allows the viewer to follow the evolution of fire-fighting techniques, equipment and fire-prevention/mitigation. Chapter headings serve as a guide. Where known, company profiles are shown to enhance the story line. Printing information with regard to illustrations is included when known.

IMPORTANCE: Fires have taken thousands of lives and destroyed or damaged property. Effective fire-fighting that could save lives and structures was of critical importance, especially in urban areas. Stricter building codes helped, which included (for example) the installation of outside fire escapes and extinguishers and stand-pipes in multi-storied structures, such as hotels. This exhibit documents the evolution of these efforts over a broad range of themes.

KNOWLEDGE, STUDY AND RESEARCH: I had to do much research on the evolution of fire-fighting, broadly considered. Especially time-consuming were my efforts to understand the monopolistic practices of some 19th and early 20th century fire-engine companies which created a trust to limit competition. It was also time-consuming to find information on the companies mentioned in this exhibit. I learned how fire extinguishers “worked” and why fire hoses evolved the way they did. **Philatelic knowledge:** Most of the rates on the covers are common: double rates, international rates and treaty rates (i.e., Canada) are noted. Attention is paid to the wide-variety of machine cancels, some of which are scarce.

CHALLENGE: Covers depicting fire apparatus are relatively scarce (likely because of demand) and early depictions of fire extinguishers are uncommon. While many covers are “common”, locating them—especially give the wide range of subjects in the exhibit—has been difficult. There are some gems matted in red.

REFERENCES: For the 19th century see *Popular Science Monthly*. Vol. 47 (Aug. Sept. 1895) for an extensive treatment of “Apparatus for Extinguishing Fires” (available on line).

www.handtubs.com/makers.htm “Hand Engine Makers (American)”